Civil Rights History Project
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Interviewee:	Aaron Dixon
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Interviewer:	David Cline
Videographer:	John Bishop
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David Cline: And I'll give a—

Aaron Dixon: Alright.

John Bishop: Okay.

David Cline: Alright, so today is, I believe, the eleventh of May 2013. We are in Seattle, Washington. You are listening to the voice of David Cline for Virginia Tech, also on behalf of the Southern Oral History Program at UNC Chapel Hill. Today we are visiting with Aaron Dixon, and behind the camera today is John Bishop from Media Generation and UCLA. And this project is the Civil Rights History Project for the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture and the Library of Congress. So, I just wanted to say thank you very much for making time for us and being part of this project.

Aaron Dixon: Okay. Thank you.

DC: And what I'd like to do to start is just—is to ask, to start with your childhood, but tell us about the family into which you were born, where, and how they may have influenced you as you grew up.

AD: Okay. My—let me see. My mother, her parents came from Mississippi. She was heavily influenced by her great-grandmother, who was born in 1867, [clears throat] Emma. And Emma's mother was a slave, and at some point she got, she became free and she did live the life of a free woman. But she was intertwined with the whole history of slavery. Her kids, particularly my great-great-grandmother, Emma, was born into the whole era of Jim Crow and had it—it was very difficult for her to find work. The only work that Emma could find was as a laundress, and she worked for many, many years as a laundress. And she had, I believe, seven kids, and I think four of them died fairly young. And her husband also died in a tragic accident, because, I believe, he was a brakeman.

And so, [clears throat] my grandmother, Emma's great-granddaughter—no, Emma's granddaughter, actually—was a product of a relationship between a Jewish man and her mother. And, from what I understand, her mother was ostracized—this was in Mississippi—her mother was ostracized by the rest of the family because she had this relationship. My grandmother's mother passed away when my grandmother was only three years old. So, she really didn't get to know her mother and she didn't know anything about her father, the Jewish man. Eventually, she was sent to Chicago to be raised by an aunt, one of her mother's sisters. And then, part of the time, she was raised by Emma, a good portion of time she was raised by Emma in Mississippi. [Clears throat]

So, my grandmother met Roy Sledge, her husband. And Roy's father was a blacksmith, one of the few blacksmiths in Mississippi [clears throat] at the time, who rode around on a white horse, from what I understand. [Laughs] And—

DC: And worked for himself, so he would have some independence.

AD: Yeah, yeah. So, his—my grandfather's, I believe, his mother was half Native American. So, let me see. So, then my mother was born to this union of Roy Sledge, who was half Native American, and [0:05:00] her mother, Josephine Sledge, who was—her birth name was Jo Willy. That was her birth name. They moved to Chicago as part of the migration of blacks from the South. And my mother was raised in Chicago and Milwaukee and St. Paul.

So, anyway, my Grandfather Roy, he worked as a Pullman porter, became alcoholic, and at times was estranged from the family. Eventually, he became sober and stayed sober for the remaining years of his life, he was about 30 years old, and he was able to get a job at the post office, where he retired. My mother, her mother, Josephine, had started her out playing piano when she was five, and she became a child prodigy on the piano and began playing concerts when she was seven years old and, eventually, she would graduate from high school when she was 16.

Then we'll switch to my father's family. My father's family came from Kentucky. And his grand—actually, going back on his mother's side, their family inherited the plantation because the slave owners had some relationship with my great-great-great-grandmother. I think, you know, they had a relationship. When he left, when slavery ended, he took his family to Denver and he gave the plantation to the woman that he had the relationship with.

Also on my father's side, my grandmother had two great-great-uncles who served in the Civil War, and when they returned from the Civil War, they actually got land for being in the

Civil War. And they took that land—I'm not clear where this land was, but it was part of the land they got from the plantation.

DC: Okay.

AD: And they started their own town called Brooksville.

DC: So, what side did they fight on?

AD: On the—they fought on the North. They were one of the—some of the first black soldiers to volunteer to fight on the North. And it goes way back. It goes further back. Someone else on that side of the family has traced it back to royalty in Scotland where there's a coat-of-arms and all that kind of stuff. So, I just remember that my grandmother on my father's side always spoke very proudly of her family and her side of the family. And, in fact, in the house that she lived in in Chicago, they had a lot of furniture that came from that plantation.

And now, her father—I'm sorry—her husband, my father's father, was, I think, maybe one-quarter or maybe half Native American. But he never knew who his mother was. He was raised by his aunt. And his father left and went to St. Louis and became a millionaire. My grandfather, his name was Elmer, and my grandmother Mildred, they met and they married and they moved. And they had—my father was born in Henderson, Kentucky, and they moved to Chicago along with the Great Migration.

My grandfather on my father's side, Elmer Dixon, he found work by working for a wealthy Jewish man. I'm not sure what capacity, but he was making enough money where he never allowed his wife to work. [0:10:00] His wife never worked. He had my father and he had another daughter, Doris, my aunt. And they were raised in Chicago.

And my father started taking classes at the Art Institute at a young age, and he got a scholarship to the Art Institute at a young age. He was also captain of the ROTC in Chicago. And

when World War II broke out, he saw the news at the movie theater, because that's where they had the news at, the movie theater, about the attack on Pearl Harbor. And he runs down to the induction center and he wants to join. And he's told that, "We don't take boys like you."

So, when he graduates, though, the Army is right there waiting for him, and so he's drafted into the Army, along with many of his fellow black soldiers. They're sent to Mississippi. I talk about in my book—there's a lot of stories he talked about in Mississippi and the trials and tribulations of being in such a volatile place as a member of the military and being black. And things get so bad that he writes his mother, telling her what's going on, and she writes Eleanor Roosevelt. And, you know—

DC: Can you talk just a little bit more about that? So, what kinds of things were going on that he told to his mom?

AD: Yeah, sure. Well, one of the stories is that they're, him and his fellow soldiers, are out on marching—I think it's called bivouac. And they're out marching in the hot sun, and the hot humid Mississippi sun, and they come across this farm. And they want to march across the farm, so they won't have to go through the swamp. And the white officer asks the farmer if they could march across his farm, his field. And the white farmer points his shotgun at the soldiers and says, "No niggers are going to march across my field." So, they have to go through the swamps. But when they camp down that night, my father and some of his friends go back and burn down the barn of the farmer.

Another story is that he meets a very light-complected woman in the small town near the base. And in the Deep South where they don't know who you are, it becomes very dangerous. And so, he wants—on their date, they're out, and he wants to walk her back across town home. And she says, "No," you know, "you probably shouldn't do that." But being from Chicago, and

the whole gentleman thing, that's what you're supposed to do. So, he convinces her that that's what he's going to do, and he's got a uniform on.

So, he walks her across town. He's getting a lot of stares at people. And this white sergeant stops him and tells him, "Boy, when I come back through here, you better not be here!" And so—no, he asks him why he's here, "What are you doing?" And he tells him, "I'm walking my friend home." He says, "Well, you better not be here when I get back."

So, my father stops off at the post office on his way to walk her home, and he writes his mother and tells his mother that his life is in danger. So, he continues walking her home and is just fortunate that he didn't run into this sergeant and he makes it back to the base.

DC: And this is a fellow—this is another person in the Army. This isn't even a local guy, correct?

AD: This is a police—this is the town sheriff.

DC: Oh, the town sheriff? Okay.

AD: The town sheriff, yeah. [Coughs] So, the final incident was that—I'm sure there are many others. But him and his fellow soldiers were preparing to go out on furlough for the weekend. And the sergeant comes in and tells them that their furlough is cancelled, that they have to clean—instead of going on furlough, they have to clean the toilets of the white soldiers. They refuse to do that and they start a riot and start throwing everything out onto the courtyard. And this riot lasts for quite a while. [0:15:00] And finally they bring a train in and they ship them out.

And then, my father finally goes to the Pacific Theater and fights in the Philippines and fights in Okinawa. While in Okinawa, he sees a Marine cut the breast off of a dead Japanese woman and hold it up in the air. And my father just, just lost control and grabbed his gun and

was going to shoot this Marine. But he's stopped by—his fellow comrades stopped him from doing it. After that incident, he goes AWOL and he meets a Japanese family in, I believe it was in Korea, and he spends time with them. And then, he comes back and then he is sent back home.

And that changed his perspective of this nation, that incident, seeing what the Marine did, and he started seeking out other things. He started being involved in Paul Robeson's Youth Brigade and starts flirting with the Communist Party. I don't think he actually joined the Communist Party, but he's flirting with the Communist Party.

So, he gets out of the Army. He meets my mother, they get married, and he's a student at a junior college. He eventually goes to the Art Institute and graduates. And my mother has started teachers' college, and they started having kids. My father gets a job at Chanute Air Force Base as a technical illustrator, so the family moves to Champaign, Illinois, and we lived there for maybe about four years or so. And there is a time, I do remember, when some men in black suits came to visit my father. He didn't let them in the house. I'm assuming they were the FBI.

And then, he gets a job offer, or he gets several job offers, and one of them is from Boeing in Seattle. He remembered Seattle when he came through on his way back from the war and on his way to the war. He spent time in Seattle, so he thought it would be a good place to move his family. So, we moved to Seattle, I believe in '57, '58. And we move around.

DC: So, the black community in Seattle gets larger during the war, right? Is that what happens?

AD: Yeah. Yeah, it does. And, you know, people coming in to work at Todd Shipyards, and blacks coming in. In California, they're coming in to work in the munitions factories. They were coming up here to work in the airplane war factories. And that's when a lot of black people do start coming west is during the war.

DC: Um-hmm. And there were particular parts of town where black folks settled?

AD: Yeah, mainly the Center Area. The Center Area was primarily where black people lived, also with Chinese and Filipinos and Japanese and some Native Americans, pretty much were all grouped up in the Center Area. And let me see, my parents—we finally found a house that we were going to settle down in. My parents bought a house in Madrona neighborhood.

DC: How would you describe that neighborhood?

AD: Madrona was a neighborhood of big old houses and lots of trees. It was just a really—really a beautiful neighborhood. And it's connected to a series of other neighborhoods. There's Harrison Valley, there's Madrona, there's Leschi, there's Mount Baker, and these are really nice neighborhoods. And the lake is to the east, so we've got views of the mountain, of the lake, not far from downtown. It's really—it was very, [laughs] really nice growing up in that neighborhood. And all those other neighborhoods were predominantly black or Filipino, Japanese, and Chinese. And all the grocery stores were all Chinese-owned, the little small grocery stores, and they gave credit to everybody. [0:20:00]

And we all went to school together, with all the Japanese, Filipino, Chinese. Growing up, it was almost like we didn't—it wasn't any distinction between our nationalities almost. So, and then, there were whites that still—that hadn't fled to Bellevue, to the East Side and other places that had stayed there. Those whites who had stayed were whites that had decided that they weren't going to move. They were just going to participate in this new thing that was happening.

DC: Yeah. So, they were in your classes—those kids would be in your classes, too?

AD: Yes. Yeah, yeah. So, it was really—we were really very fortunate to grow up in that type of environment. Now, outside of those neighborhoods there was the usual racism. There

was the police brutality. There was the difficulty with finding jobs. My mother had a difficult time finding a job, and she had doors closed on her.

DC: Because of race?

AD: Because of race.

DC: Do you remember any particular incidents?

AD: Frederick and Nelson's, a store called Frederick and Nelson's—it's owned by Macy's now, but it was the main retail store, the largest retail store in Seattle, Frederick and Nelson's. And she had a difficult time. She went in there one time when they had a sign up, "Hiring," and she was told, "We're not hiring," you know. But eventually she did get a job.

And, we—growing up, we lived right across the street from a park. And the park had people there during the summertime, and there was a lot of different programs, and because this was the baby boom generation, just a lot of kids. And people had big families. I'm talking about—our family was considered to be small with four kids, two brothers and a sister and myself. But there were families that had like seven, eight kids [coughs] big kids—I mean, big families. And almost all of them were two-parent families and hardworking parents. And many of them had come from the South and other parts.

And my father being an artist, and my father, he loved other people of other cultures. He just felt a need to always connect with people of other cultures. In doing so, he met some artists and [coughs] people who were in the theater and other arts, and he got involved in the folk dancing group. They had a folk dancing group, and it was people of Greek, Jewish, Italian, and black, and they met at different people's homes to do their dancing. And they met at our house quite often and pull the rug back and bring the wine out [laughter] and the music, and they were doing their folk dancing.

So, this is the kind of environment we grew up in. And all of us kids, we were required to play an instrument. All the kids were required to play an instrument. My grandmother in Chicago, my mother's mother, she was a very kind of dominating, kind of controlling type of woman, and so she bought the instruments for everybody.

DC: Everyone will play something. [Laughs]

AD: Everybody's going to play something. And I was told I was going to play the violin.

DC: Okay. [Laughs]

AD: So, not that I didn't like the violin. I did, but I just never quite could grasp the whole reading notes and everything. And I brought my violin home, and it was broken one day, and so that was it for me. My younger brother, he took up the violin. He played it all the way through until he graduated from high school. [Coughs] Elmer played the trumpet. He started out with the guitar, and then he played the trumpet all the way. And my sister played the piano. And my mother oftentimes played the piano. And my father was trying to do his artwork on the side sometimes. And he did have a showing of his artwork at the Frye Museum.

DC: Oh! He worked as an illustrator, right?

AD: Yeah, he was a technical illustrator.

DC: For Boeing.

AD: And his friends at Boeing, who worked with him, they said he was the best, [0:25:00] best artist out there. But I know that he was really frustrated that he really didn't have the time, the large amount of time that is needed to just really work on your art. But he also was a poet, as well, and he wrote poetry and he exposed us to poetry. I learned Shakespeare from my father. I could quote different parts of Shakespeare because my father was doing it.

So, then we also participated in sports. My father didn't really push sports, so we kind of—because we lived across the street from the park, we were very much involved in football, baseball, basketball, tennis. We played a lot of tennis—my brother, Michael, he got a scholarship to UCLA to play tennis and ping pong and all those things. And we played in the tournaments with the parks department.

DC: Now, would there be incidents there playing on sports teams, in terms of race at all?

AD: Yeah, yeah, I mean, but there was—I mean, there was always fights amongst each other. [Laughter] There were so many kids. There was always the fights. We got into fights. But when we were on the softball team and we went to other areas, like Ballard and Queen Anne, to play other softball teams, yeah, there was a lot of tension and a lot of, you know, calls going the wrong way. And there was, yeah, there was a lot.

And people, black people didn't even go to Ballard. You couldn't even go to Ballard. You couldn't go to Queen Anne. That was forbidden territory, particularly if you were young. And even in high school, they turned into fights and almost riots between some of those schools, Ballard and Queen Anne. So, yeah, it was really extremely racially charged a lot of times playing some of those teams. So, even though we were in this cocoon, there was always that element outside, that racism that we always knew about and we always heard about.

DC: Do—?

JB: [inaudible]

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're back.

DC: Do you remember your folks talking to you about what it meant to be black, or sort of how your own race consciousness developed?

AD: Well, you know, we—

DC: It's hard to sort of define that moment.

AD: Yeah. Well, they never really—they just told stories. They told stories, you know, that oral tradition. We got the stories from my grandparents and we got stories from our great-grandparents and our aunts and our uncles whenever we went back to Chicago. We were constantly hearing stories, and they were constantly telling us all the time. And when they were talking amongst themselves, we would hear stories always, just racism and things that are going on. [Coughs] But I never—our parents never just directly said this and that, and this is what's going on. But we were able to understand.

I remember when I was 13 and I said I wanted to be a policeman, my parents got real angry and said, "No, you're not going to be no policeman!" And I remember when I was 16 years old and I said I wanted to join the Marines and go to Vietnam, and my father got even—that's the angriest I've ever seen him, saying that no son of his is going to go to Vietnam. And there were people being drafted to go to Vietnam all the time. A lot of people that we knew were in Vietnam.

DC: Um-hmm. And that was based on his own experience in World War II?

AD: His own experience. His own experience.

DC: Now, did they involve you in politics at all? I think—wasn't there a visit when King came to town when you were—?

AD: Yeah, yeah. You know, we had political discussions. We just had discussions in the kitchen. The kitchen was always the place where we had discussions. And the older we got, the more broader they got and the more volatile they got. Let me see, when I was around 12 or 13 years old, I marched with Martin Luther King when he came to Seattle. Then, I started getting

involved in the demonstrations around town. [0:30:00] I remember when George Wallace came to town, we demonstrated against that and some other things. And I was only like 12, 13, or 14 years old. So, I was the only one, and my brothers and sister—I'm not sure how that happened, how I got involved, but I did. I think it might have been through our church or something like that.

So, I graduated from high school in 1967 by the skin of my teeth. [Laughs] And I had started working when I was a junior in high school. I worked a full time job. I worked—and during the summer, I worked fourteen hours a day, seven days a week. I bought my own clothes. I bought my own records. I bought—I was determined I was going to be independent. I had a job and I didn't mind working.

And even before that, most of us, my generation, we cut grass. We went to people's houses and we cut grass. I had a paper route when I was in middle school. In the seventh grade, I had a paper route, where I had to get up at six o'clock every morning and go deliver papers. And that was—it became too tough and too much of a strain, and so, I only had that for a month. But Elmer got an evening paper route job that he did after he came home from school, and so I had to help him with that. And he had that for a year.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

AD: Oh, really? Oh, right on!

JB: Yeah, I had one, too.

AD: Right on.

DC: [Laughing] You don't hear about it anymore.

AD: No, you don't.

DC: People don't deliver newspapers anymore.

AD: You don't hear about that anymore.

DC: Or adults driving cars—

AD: Yeah, yeah, that's right. So, yeah, I graduated. And then, I was trying to figure out what I was going to do. Our parents had always told us we were going to go to college, so—but I hadn't had any prospects yet. I wanted to go to Tennessee State. And that's where my aunt went, and most people my age and older were going to black colleges. That's where their destination was, and that's where I wanted to go to school. But my grades weren't good enough to get in Tennessee State, so I was turned down.

And when Stokely Carmichael came to town, I really got fired up. And I think Elmer was with me and my good friend, Michael Dean. And then I started wearing those Stokely Carmichael glasses. And I started really, really evolving and really growing in my understanding of what the racial politics was in America.

DC: Would that have been when you first heard the term Black Power, do you think?

AD: Yeah, yeah. Well, I had heard it in the news.

DC: Okay, yeah.

AD: But then he had been traveling around the country, him and H. Rap Brown.

DC: Right.

AD: And then, you know—wow, he's coming to Seattle! So, I made sure I was there. [Coughs] And that really changed—that just like blew us into another direction. You really start thinking about—plus, all these things are going on in America, you know, the riot in Los Angeles in 1965.

DC: Right, right.

AD: And the continuous riots after that every summer, and the whole Civil Rights Movement and everything that's going on, not to mention that John F. Kennedy had been assassinated, and that was a—my father cried when that happened, when he was assassinated.

DC: He did?

AD: And it really was devastating to the black community because it was the first time we had a President that really stood up [child's voice in background] and was going to support what black people were doing. So—

DC: Was his picture up in their home? I'm just curious.

AD: Yeah, I'm sure they—yeah, they had some kind of picture somewhere.

DC: I'm just curious what pictures were up on the walls.

AD: Yeah, they had—let me see, what kind of pictures? Well, there was artwork on the walls, some of my father's artwork and other artwork. And there was a bust of Beethoven, who we later found out was black. [Child's voice in background] Well we did listen to a lot of Paul Robeson. Paul Robeson, um, what's his name out of Harlem, that congressman?

DC: Oh—

JB: Adam Clayton Powell?

DC: Powell, yeah, Adam Clayton Powell.

AD: Yeah. And [0:35:00] records of Martin Luther King, and we listened to a lot of opera, a lot of musicals, a lot of classical music, a lot of jazz. Music was a big part of our family. It was always being played in the house. So, let me see, I go to—

DC: We got up to where you're out of high school.

AD: Yeah. So, after Stokely, that's it.

DC: Yeah.

AD: I'm all, I'm all fired up. So, I'm at my job one day, and I have my Ray-Ban sunglasses on, and I'm wearing them on the job, and my Afro's getting bigger. And I worked on this line—it's a conveyor belt, and everybody had to put dishes on the trays. And I had to call them out, you know, what was, if it was sugar-free, or whatever type of diet it was. And I messed up a couple of times, because I had my sunglasses on. [Laughter]

And so, the supervisor tells me to take my sunglasses off. Oh, why did she tell me that? I just blew up and I lit into her with all these profanities and walked off my job. [Child's voice in background] I had had that job for about three years. Now I don't have a job. I'm not in school. I'm hanging out with my friends. My mother tells me I've got to do something.

So, I found a little part-time job working with a poverty program that was going around doing these racially—racial skits. We're going like to schools and programs and different places, and we'd play these different roles. And then, from that, I met this guy who was a playwright named Aaron Dumas, and he had written a play.

He asked me to be in his play. It was called *General's Coup*. It was about a crazed—it was about a black army that is raised up, and they march on the Capitol and they start taking over the country and they take over the White House, and the general gets crazy, and I'm his rational son. And we play this play all over in coffeehouses—they had coffeehouses then. Well, they still got coffeehouses, but they were bigger then. They had coffeehouses, and in schools we're doing this play. And I really started getting into it.

After that—we finished with that. I got into another play called *Tom Jones*. So, I'm also writing poetry. I'm also writing a lot of poetry. I'm getting into the theater. I do a poetry reading at the Links Fine Arts Program. I win a scholarship, five-hundred-dollar scholarship. And I meet this—I hear about this program from this Jewish woman named Mrs. Richman. I went to school

with her daughter. She works with the Urban League, and they started up this college program to help blacks get into the University of Washington, and they help get them jobs, and they do all this stuff, they get advisors for them, and all these things.

So, man, I took my SAT test and I did good on it. In September, I was at the University of Washington, and I was a student there. And now the Movement all around us is really catching steam, [coughs] as far as getting involved with some other black students there, and we start the first Black Student Union [coughs] at the University of Washington.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're back on.

AD: Okay.

DC: The Black Student Union.

AD: So, we start the Black Student Union. All of us black students are meeting in the Hub. And Ron Dellums is coming up from Oakland and other organizers from San Francisco State, because they already started a big takeover at San Francisco State. Then we helped to form the BSU at Garfield High School. You want to—?

JB: You can pick her up.

AD: Oh, okay.

[Laughter]

AD: Hi, honey. So—

JB: Who is this?

AD: This is Taleeah, my granddaughter.

JB: Well, you're now in the record of the Library of Congress. [Laughter]

AD: So, anyway—[0:40:00] so, in our activity we're getting politicized, constantly. And I remember hearing about this organization in Oakland called the Black Panther Party that marched on the capitol in Sacramento. This was, I believe, in the summer of '67, I believe it was, before I even had started school.

Anyway going through the BSU, we decided to have this demonstration at Franklin High School, because there was a racial incident that occurred there, and plus they don't have any black, any black or Asian staff [child's voice] on the school staff.

JB: Let's pause.

AD: Yeah.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

DC: First grandchild we've had on the—

JB: Okay, so you can go on.

DC: Okay, so Franklin High.

AD: Yeah, so we go to Franklin High. We march on the school. We march into the office. The principal won't meet with us, so we march into his office, and we're yelling and chanting and saying our chants.

DC: What were the issues there? Oh, it was hiring of black staff.

AD: Yeah, and the incident that happened with the black student and the white student.

DC: What was the incident?

AD: They got in a fight, and the black student got kicked out, and the white student remained in school. So, we wanted to address those two issues, but he refuses to meet with us. And we march into his office and we're yelling our chants. So, he decides to leave the school and he tells the staff to go home. And so, the students are there. We get the students into the

auditorium and we have a big rally. Afterwards, we're feeling really like, "Yeah, man! We did something here!"

DC: Took over! [Laughs]

AD: We took over the school. We ran him out of there. So, we're feeling really good. A week later, I get arrested from my home, along with other leaders of the demonstration, and we're in the King County jail.

DC: Charged with—?

AD: Unlawful assembly. The day is April 4, 1968, and Walter Cronkite comes on and announces Martin Luther King is assassinated. So, [clears throat] this was—

DC: You're in jail?

AD: Yeah, we're in jail. And then, the riots are breaking out all across the country, even in Seattle, and young people are going crazy. And we want to be out there going crazy, but we can't. So, I remember that evening, going back to my bunk and saying to myself that they killed Martin Luther King, a man of peace, [coughs] and that now it's time for something else. And I decided that my picket sign was going to be replaced by a gun.

We had already—had been doing some organizing with SNCC and we had met this guy named Voodoo Man, who we were all going over there to his house, meeting. And he had some guns over there, and so the idea had already been implanted in our heads, along with Stokely Carmichael and others, that armed violence was what was needed. So—

DC: And did you look at it in terms of self-defense or something else?

AD: Yeah, yeah—well, whatever. You know, whatever! [Laughs] However we—I don't even think we had really even thought about it. We didn't know what we were going to do with a

gun. But it probably was more about self-defense, because we had seen a lot of police brutality that had been taking place.

So then in the backdrop, you had Che Guevara and Fidel Castro. They had marched on Havana. And the movie had just came out about Che Guevara. And you had the revolutionary movements that were taking place throughout South America—Chile, Argentina, Brazil—and then, as well as in Africa. So all over the world, actually, you had this kind of uprising of young people in Europe, and in France, London, even in India. So, then you had the whole hippie movement and the movement against the war, the antiwar movement. [Coughs] So it just seemed like, okay, America is just getting ready to explode. People want change.

And so, we finally got out of jail. And then, I was—ended up, we went down to the Black Student Union conference in San Francisco. [0:45:00] And while we were down there, we heard that Bobby Seale, the leader of the Black Panther Party, was coming to do the keynote address. So, but we also heard that there was the funeral of this Panther who had been killed. His name was Little Bobby Hutton; he was known as Little Bobby Hutton. So, we went over to his funeral. And we had stopped and got some berets before we went over there. And we saw Marlon Brando standing out front with a black leather jacket on and a black beret, talking with Bobby Seale. We go into the church.

DC: Why did you stop to get the berets?

AD: Because that's what the Panthers wore, and we wanted to fit in. We wanted to fit in and show solidarity. We go in and see the body of Little Bobby in this very emotional setting. His mother, aunts, are wailing and crying and reaching out to his body. And these Panthers are standing around the walls with their arms folded, looking very serious.

DC: What were the circumstances of his death?

AD: He was—it was because of Martin Luther King's death, and there were some Panthers that wanted to take revenge, and they went out on the street. And it wasn't something that was okayed by the leadership, but it was some people that decided they wanted to do this on their own. One of them was a leader in the party, with Eldridge Cleaver and David Hilliard, too, as well. Huey and Bobby were in jail at the time; otherwise, they wouldn't allow this thing to happen.

So, they decided to go out on the street, you know, try to do something. They get in a confrontation with some police, a shootout ensues. Little Bobby Hutton and Eldridge Cleaver run into this abandoned house. It's surrounded by police. They start shooting into the house, and this goes on for 20, 30, 40 minutes, tear gas. And finally they have to surrender. Little Bobby Hutton throws his rifle out the door, and they come out with their hands up. Little Bobby Hutton is told to run toward the police car, and he does, and they shoot him. And they shoot him about 20 or 25 times.

And not only was Bobby Hutton killed, but Eldridge Cleaver was wounded and also put in jail, because he's an ex-felon now, and they're going to send him back to San Quentin. David Hilliard, the national captain, is also arrested, and there's 18 other Panthers that are all arrested, and another Panther that is wounded. And these were early Panthers, these were early people.

DC: Yeah, yeah.

AD: And so, now, they're taken off the streets.

DC: I was going to say, it sounds like an effort to just gut the Panther Party.

AD: Yeah, it really had a devastating effect. So, that's what happened with Little Bobby Hutton. Bobby Seale comes over later on that evening at the funeral. He's very emotional. He comes with Kathleen Cleaver and one of the wounded Panthers, and he gives a speech that is

very powerful, very emotionally charged. And my brother and I, after the speech, along with Anthony Ware, we make a beeline to where he's at and we tell him we want a Black Panther Party chapter in Seattle.

Weeks later, he flies to Seattle, along with George Murray, the Minister of Education, who is also a professor at San Francisco State College and was very much behind the big student strike they had there for a black studies program. And—

DC: How radical was the Black Student Union? I'm struck, because they invited him to be the keynote, right? Bobby Seale?

AD: Yeah. Well, the thing is is the Black Panther Party was such a powerful force in the Bay Area and an influencing force and a growing force, you couldn't help but want to invite them. Plus, there were people—and there were people at San Francisco State who were in the Black Panther Party, and there were a lot of people who were in the BSU who associated and worked with the Black Panther Party. You had Emory Douglas, who was the Minister of Culture of the Black Panther Party, he was a student there. [0:50:00] George Murray, the Minister of Education, was a professor there. So, that whole student strike—the Black Panther Party was one of the most key elements in making that happen.

So, Bobby Seale comes to Seattle with George Murray, and there's about 20 people. We all meet at my mother's house, my parents' house. We meet over a two or three-day period. And a couple of people bring their guns to the meeting. He tells us what you need to be in the Black Panther Party. He starts off that you need to have two weapons and two thousand rounds of ammunition. And he also gives us a booklist of 25 books that we're told we have to read. And we have to study two hours a day and have to go to political education class twice a week.

And he's on his way to the East Coast to organize other chapters and branches. He asked me to go with him, but I wasn't ready to go. In the meeting, he asked who's going to be the captain, and I was designated as the captain. So, we started developing—

DC: Were you up for that role, or were you voted into it, or how was—?

AD: I was kind of voted into it. Everybody started pointing at me. I don't know why, but they did.

JB: [Excuse me]

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay. We're back on.

DC: And you're 19 years old?

AD: Yeah, 19 and still a student at the UW. So, a week later, I'm called to Oakland. Bobby Seale calls me and tells me to come down. That was my first flight on an airplane. I had my Black Panther uniform on, and I am nervous about how I'm going to be accepted by these guys.

DC: So, at that point, what is the Black Panther uniform?

AD: It's a black leather jacket, powder blue shirt with a black tie, black pants, black beret, and black shoes, or black combat boots. That was the uniform, official uniform of the Black Panther Party, and that's what party members were required to wear most of the time. I'm picked up at the airport by two Panthers, Robert Bay, who was a Vietnam veteran, along with Tommy Jones, who was also a veteran from the Navy, but he's from Tacoma, Washington, and Robert Bay's the captain.

So, they drive me over to the office. I meet the national secretary, and she tells me that Bobby Seale will catch up with me in a couple of days, so I'm staying with Landon and Randy—

I'm staying with Tommy Jones. But Robert Bay takes me to his house to meet Landon and Randy Williams, who are also captains. They are Vietnam Special Forces veterans. And the first thing that they start wanting to show me was their weaponry, and they each have their own armament in their rooms. And they have bullet-loading equipment, and they're showing me their weapons and their handguns. It's becoming clear that, hey, [laughs] I'm in a serious organization with people that are really serious about what they're doing.

DC: Um-hmm. Had you handled a weapon yet at that point in your life?

AD: Yeah. Growing up, we all had BB guns and we all had .22s and we went hunting with .22s. So, yeah, and I had handled a weapon at Voodoo Man's house. So, yeah, it wasn't—and we had friends that—white friends who did a lot of hunting. They always had gun racks at their house. Yeah, guns were not foreign at all to me or us.

So I go to visit Huey in jail. That's one of the orders, one of the things I have to do, is visit him. I go out and sell papers with some Black Panther Party members. [Coughs] And then, I spent some time with Bobby Seale traveling from Merritt College, meeting with BSU members. And then, we end up in San Francisco at a Central Committee meeting, and at that meeting is Stokely Carmichael, Don Cox, the field marshal of the Black Panther Party, David Hilliard, the national captain, and [0:55:00] some other people, some other captains, Black Panther, and these guys are all older guys. And so, I'm introduced as the new captain.

And then, the next day, I am with Robert Bay, Landon and Randy, and we're at their house. We're drinking some what is called Bitter Dog, which was a street drink, which is dark port wine, pour a little bit out, and you put some lemon juice in there and you shake it up. It's a pretty potent drink and later became known as Panther Piss. It was dubbed, "Panther Piss." So, we're drinking that and we're smoking some Brother Roogie, which is the codename for

marijuana. And Landon didn't drink or smoke weed, so he's in the front room watching TV. So, I'm feeling a little more comfortable and loosening up and everything.

And suddenly, we hear a loud bang and we run into the living room. And Landon is there with his .44 Magnum in his hand. And Robert Bay said, "Man, what did you do? Man, why'd you shoot the TV out?" He said, "I was tired of watching the cowboys and Indians, and the Indians always getting killed. I shot the TV out."

So, later on, right after that, we go down to Seventh Street in West Oakland. We get something to eat. And me and another young Panther named Orleander Harrison, who was in Sacramento when they went—when they took the armed delegation. He was only 16 years old. I think he was 15 when they went to Sacramento, and he's very prominent in that film, holding that M1 carbine with a toothpick in his mouth. So, me and him go out, and we're smoking cigarettes. And a car drives by, a police car. And we start—*he* starts yelling at it, "Pig! You damn pig! You better stop! You better stop!" and he starts cussing at the pig and he's just going off. So, I join in and I'm doing it, too.

And this is only maybe two weeks after Little Bobby Hutton had been killed, and there's a lot of tension, a lot of tension between the police department and the Black Panther Party. And pretty soon the police goes around, and he comes back and he calls for reinforcements. More police start driving up on the scene. And Robert Bay and Landon and Randy come out, and Tommy Jones. They come out.

And then people are actually running home and closing their stores and saying, "I'm getting out of here! There's going to be a shootout!" People are leaving. And this is the same corner that Huey Newton had his shootout, where he was wounded, and two policemen, one was killed and one was wounded, the same corner, Seventh and Wood. And people are running, and

pretty soon the street is deserted almost, and the prostitutes are the only ones that are there. They say they're going to stay here and help, see what happens to the Panthers.

And I just remember Robert Bay comes out, and he says, "Spread out!" He says, "Spread out," in this deep voice, so we all spread out. The police are all bunched together. The police have their hands on their guns.

DC: Spread out, so as not to give them a bunched-up target?

AD: Right.

DC: Yeah, yeah.

AD: Exactly, right. So, we spread out. The police, they don't spread out. They're all bunched up. They're showing a lot more fear than we are. They've got their hands on their guns. We have our hands on our guns. I had just been given a 9 millimeter automatic the day before, we're all armed. And I remember seeing—oh, pretty soon the street's deserted. So, I'm thinking, "Oh, shit, man! What have I got myself into?" You know? "Damn!"

So, I see this young black guy, and he's got a bag of groceries. And I'm saying to myself, "I wish he would stay here and help us." And our eyes meet. And he looks at me and he says "Man, I would stay here and help you, but I gotta get home." And then, he's gone.

Now, the police—there's a lieutenant out front of the police, and he's looking at Landon, because Landon is out front of us. And he's got his hand on his gun and he says, "I'm going to search you." And Landon says, "No, you're not going to search me." He starts walking towards Landon, and Landon starts backing up. And I'm thinking, "Shit, Landon shot that TV out! Shit! Ain't no telling what he's going to do."

DC: Um-hmm.

AD: And this went on for a few seconds and it just—it was so much tension you [1:00:00] could have cut it, as cliché as it sounds. But suddenly, Landon tripped over a garbage can top. He bounces right back up, but you can hear the garbage can top reverberating, and that just like cuts the tension. And the next thing, the police turn around. They don't say a word. They turn around, they get in their car, and they drive off.

So, this was a victory for us. We stood our ground. And they chose that this was not a night that they wanted to engage with us. We gave our guns to the prostitutes because we figured they were going to come back with more reinforcements. And then, finally we left and go home. So, that was my baptism into the Black Panther Party that night.

DC: Wow, yeah.

AD: The very next day, they have the Saturday Panther meeting that they have every week at the St. Augustine's Church. Panthers are coming from all over the Bay Area—San Mateo, San Jose, Richmond, Vallejo, and everywhere—about 125 people in there, men and women. Most people have their uniforms on, and it's just electrifying. And Bobby Seale gets up, and he talks. And he talks about the Ten Point Program, how we got to know the Ten Point Program and recite it. He introduces me, and I'm introduced as the first captain of the Seattle chapter, the first office outside of the state of California.

And [coughs] so, after the meeting everybody is greeting me, and I feel really like this is my new family. I leave with Robert Bay and Tommy Jones. We go back to the house. When we get to the house, the phone rings. Robert Bay runs and grabs it, answers the phone, and he says, "Yeah." He slams the phone down, he runs to his room, he grabs two rifles, he hands me one and a box of ammo. [Coughs] And he says, "They're vamping on the comrades at the church!" So, we jump in his car, and he's speeding, going about 50, 60 miles an hour down Grove Street. And

he asks me if I know how to load the weapon. And I said, "Yeah." I mean, I had never seen that—it was a .44 Magnum carbine—but I figured out how to load it. So, I load it and I say, "Damn!" You know, "Here we go again."

When we get down to the church, there's nobody there. I don't know what happened, or what the call was, or if they left, but nobody's there. We're relieved that nobody is there. So, we go on back.

The next day, I'm on a flight back to Seattle. So, I know what it is about to be in the Black Panther Party. I began—we began organizing [coughs] the Seattle chapter, and we open up our first office and get our phones and [coughs] take over 300 applications over a month's period of time of people wanting to join the Black Panther Party. And [coughs]—

DC: I was going to say, I mean, there had to be hot adrenalin with these kinds of things.

AD: Yeah, yeah. Well, that was—

DC: And then, the stress.

AD: That was just the beginning.

DC: And just getting started. [Laughs]

AD: [Laughs] That was just the beginning, you know. Oh, my God!

So anyway, we open up our office. We've got all these young people and older people, Vietnam vets have been joining. And we're carrying our guns around, because it's not illegal to carry a gun down the street. So, we're carrying our rifles, our shotguns, with us everywhere we go, up and down the street, in the cars and everything.

DC: Um-hmm, and these are all legally acquired guns?

AD: Legally acquired—well, I won't say they're all legally acquired. They definitely weren't all legally acquired. But they were legal guns. They weren't automatic weapons.

DC: Okay.

AD: So, you know—

DC: And did the police ever hassle you over guns?

AD: Oh, yeah. We're having confrontations continuously. There's continuous confrontation. And we started getting calls from the community and we start getting domestic violence calls, landlord disputes, problems with the police. And we're trying to answer these calls. The domestic violence calls, we'll send some armed Panthers over there, and they would stop that domestic violence that's going on.

It was really empowering, and for the first time the community had somebody they could call for all kinds of problems. For the first time, they could just pick the phone up and say, "Hey, I've got this problem. I've got that problem. Will you send some people over here to help me?" [1:05:00] There was an incident where—

DC: In America, we're taught that that's supposed to be the police.

AD: Yeah, right.

DC: But was that not the case?

AD: Oh, no, it wasn't the case in Seattle or anywhere else. So, we now were filling that role. So, there was a landlord incident where the landlord had taken the door off of the hinges of a woman who had several kids. And we sent some Panthers to the house, and they got the door and carried it down the street and put it back on the woman's—on the hinges. [Coughs]

So, we started getting calls from this high school. I was sending in weekly reports to Bobby Seale, and we talked on the phone. And he told me, he said, "Dixon, you guys are going out on too many of these community calls, [coughs] because the community likes to take advantage of you. So, I want you to cut back on that."

DC: What was your response?

AD: "Right on. Right on, Chairman. Right on, Chairman Bobby." Because we—you had to follow orders in all your actions. That was one of the mottos of the Black Panther Party: follow orders in all your actions.

DC: Um-hmm. Now, were you all doing your reading assignments and all that?

AD: We had political education class. We're having our *Red Book*—you know, we studied the *Red Book*, Chairman Mao's *Red Book*, because it had a lot of things in there that were just basic common things, the three models and seven rules and just like you don't take anything from the people or the masses and you return everything you borrow, you fight against liberalism, criticism, constructive criticism and self-criticism, and just all very basic things to help us with the day-to-day struggles between ourselves and what we had to do as well as our political education class where we usually read out of the newspaper and discussed things that was in the *Black Panther* newspaper.

The Black Panther Party is spreading all across the country around this time, and the L.A. chapter is really catching a lot—three Panthers are killed in L.A. in the summer of '68. [Clears throat] So—

DC: You're reading some pretty heavy stuff. How did that—?

AD: Yeah, Frantz Fanon.

DC: Right.

AD: *Wretched of the Earth*; *Black Skin, White Masks; Black Rage*, and other—I mean even before that, we were already reading heavy stuff in college and even in high school, because there was a lot of black writers who were writing a lot. There was James Baldwin. We

always read a lot of James Baldwin, Richard Wright, and many, many others. We really read a lot. Even before we got in the party, we were reading all these books.

DC: But the folks that were applying for membership and that were joining you all, were they down with this kind of reading? You know, this is the whole thing with the lumpenproletariat, I assume.

AD: Yeah, yeah.

DC: Was the lumpen ready to read this kind of stuff?

AD: Well, yeah, yeah! I mean, people had to attend political education class. People had to get the books. Bobby Hutton didn't know how to read or write before he joined the party. And by the time he was 17, he knows how to read and he knows how to write, because he's reading these things that he has to read, and comrades help him with that as well. So, and then, we started getting a lot of college-educated—college students had begun to join the Black Panther Party. So, you've got a combination of the lumpenproletariat and you've got all these college students that are coming in as well. So, it was a good combination of the two coming together.

So, we started getting calls from this woman on Monday that her son was going to an all-white high school, he got beat up, and the principal wouldn't do anything about it. So, I explained to her we couldn't come out there. So, she called back on Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday. "Sorry, ma'am. We can't come." She called back on Friday. She was crying. Towards the end of the school year, white students had brought bats and chains to school. They were beating the kid and threatening the kid, and nobody would do anything about it. We got another call from another mother: same thing.

When we got that last call, there were about 13 Panthers in the office, and everybody had their rifle and shotgun. So, I said, "Okay, let's go. We're going to go." So, we get out there. There's 25 policemen there on the side of the building.

DC: They're already there?

AD: Already there.

DC: So, they knew you were coming?

AD: Well, they probably—might have been called [1:10:00] out there because of the disturbance, because of what was going on.

DC: Which high school is this?

AD: Rainier Beach. [Coughs] By this time, school is already out. So, we cross the street. One of the sergeants says, "Dixon, you can't take those loaded weapons into the school."

DC: They all know you at this point?

AD: Yeah, they know me. They know the other comrades. And so, knowing the gun laws, and the gun law states that if a bullet is not in the chamber, and you're carrying it, then it's considered unloaded. So, I said, "They're not loaded."

So, we go right up to the office, into the school. We see the principal. He sees us. He takes off running. We go back outside. We get somebody. They go get him and they escort him and sit him down. And I tell him, "If you don't start protecting these kids, we're going to protect them." And he is visibly shaken and he promises that from now on he will protect them.

And so, we leave. We back our way across the street. We don't turn our backs to the police, because that's one of the things Huey told me when I went to visit him: Don't turn your back to the pigs. So, we get in our cars and we drive back. They follow us back, but they don't

stop us. And they're trying to come up with some kind of indictment against us, but we didn't do anything illegal.

DC: Right.

AD: And there's no law at that time against bringing rifles and shotguns into the school. So, that was the first major incident that really marked the emergence of the Seattle chapter [coughs]—

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're on.

AD: Okay. So, I mean, there's a lot of things that happened. I mean, I can't tell you everything.

DC: Um-hmm.

AD: I would just say—would say that we had some—there were some people who had joined the party for their own personal reasons. There were elements that were starting to do robbing banks and robbing stores that were connected to the party. The same thing started happening in Oakland, because a lot of these people—we didn't really have a way of providing income for people, so a lot of people in the Bay Area, that's what a lot of people did. But they started, people who were from the lumpen, they started reverting back to their old tactics. And the fact that they had a uniform on and a gun. Because when you give young men a gun and you put a uniform on, they do crazy things. And this was starting to happen within the party.

DC: Now, would you try to control that?

AD: Well, we had—what Huey did was he, from prison he gave an order that we had to have a purge. So, we began to expel these people from the party. In Oakland, they had a big purge in the Bay Area, and in Seattle, we had a big purge here, too. And it really almost

destroyed the party. There were two people that lost their lives behind this activity that was taking place. It really damaged our credibility in the media, I mean in the community. And even people left because of that.

DC: I know particularly in Seattle there were bombing incidents, fire bombs.

AD: Yeah, well, that was separate. That was separate.

DC: That was separate?

AD: Yeah, that was separate, because in July, after I returned from New York with Bobby Seale and Eldridge Cleaver and Emory Douglas—we went to the U.N. for the purpose of getting the U.N. to intervene in the trial of Huey P. Newton and intervene on the genocidal practices of the U.S. against the black community. So, there was a whole plan that the party had developed by going into the U.N. and having Black Panther Party members standing with "Free Huey" flags behind every flag of the nations of the United Nations.

And we were going to go in with the delegation of James Forman, Stokely Carmichael, myself, and so on. But when we got to the SNCC office and had the meeting with James Forman and Stokely Carmichael, it ended up into a big argument and almost a fist fight. And we stormed out of the office, and the coalition between SNCC and the Black Panther Party was *dead* at that point.

DC: That was it?

AD: That was it. And James Forman was the one that was supposed to get us into the U.N., so we had to find somebody else. We found this woman, Mae Mallory, who was one of the leaders, founders, of the Black Power Movement. We got a small audience with the Tanzanian delegation.

DC: Okay. When is this now?

AD: This was June— [1:15:00] this is June of ’68.

DC: Okay. I was trying to think in terms of when Forman—. It would have been right around that time.

AD: Yeah, it probably was.

DC: Yeah.

AD: So, it was a power struggle, because James Forman, he had been around longer and he felt it. Because he had brought some of his field marshals up there to the meeting—I mean, not to the meeting, but to be in the SNCC office while we were there. And I just remember them not being very friendly and some tension going on there.

So I come back to Seattle. And only a week after I’ve been in Seattle, I’m on my way to the office and I see police cars in front of the office. And I started to turn around. I said, “No, let me go find out what’s going on.” I go down there, and they ask me, “Are you Aaron Dixon?” I said, “Yeah.” “You’re under arrest.”

So, I was arrested, along with Curtis Harris, and charged with stealing a typewriter. Now Curtis Harris was the one that had been organizing these illegal activities, and we didn’t know what was going on at the time. And then, he later on would become suspected of being a police informant, because I was arrested—we were both arrested, and he was released.

And they had a rally down at Garfield, because the community heard about what happened, so the party organized a big rally at Garfield High School. And they march down to the jail and demanded my freedom. They march back to Garfield, and it erupted into a riot, a major riot, Seattle’s first major riot. It lasts for three days. There was a lot of firebombing and turning over police cars. At midnight, they decide to let me go. So, they let me go at midnight. I’m picked up by some Panthers.

DC: Do they think that that might calm things down?

AD: Yeah. I thought they thought it would calm things down. But I get out at midnight. They're still rioting down at Garfield, and they've got the streets all blocked off and helicopters flying. I get to my mother's house, and there's some Panthers there. There's about eight, ten, twelve Panthers, and everybody's got their rifles and guns. And they want to go down to Garfield and engage the enemy. They're trying to convince me. I give in and say, "Okay, yeah. Let's go ahead and go down there."

But we try to make it down there on foot. A helicopter spots us and shines a light on us. One of the Panthers shoots the light out. And pretty soon, we know that the area is going to be surrounded by police. There's somebody out there who we know. He calls us into his house. [Coughs] And just as we got into his house, the area is surrounded by police.

This kind of really kicks off a war between the Black Panther Party and the Seattle Police Department. [Coughs] We go on a campaign of sniping and firebombing. We're sniping at the police. And pretty soon, Madrona Hill, we call it Pork—it gets the name of Pork Chop Hill, which is a battle in Korea. And police, at night, they don't come up there unless they're three cars deep and with four men in a car and shotguns hanging out the window. That's how tense it's gotten.

This goes on all through that whole summer of '68. And all across the country you've got people shooting at police. You've got riots. You've got people attacking police stations. It's almost like the Revolution had come that summer. [Coughs]

DC: Um-hmm. Now, did they—did the police ever reach out and try and negotiate with you, you know, in a—through a more peaceful way? Or was it just this —?

AD: No. No, that wasn't going to happen, because we weren't going to sit down and negotiate with them.

DC: Okay.

AD: But the Seattle Metro did send a delegation up to meet with us, because where our office was, that's where the bus parked right in front of it. When we opened up our office, we told the bus driver, "You can't park there. You've got to park back there." And one day, we were having a meeting, and the bus driver decided to test us, and he parked in front of us while we were having a political education meeting. And Elmer and another Panther went on the bus and [1:20:00] jumped on the bus driver, took his phone out, and threw it on top of the roof.

And I got charged with that charge. [Laughs] They had a warrant out for me, so I had to go down and turn myself in. But the black judge—they had a black judge, and he let me off. But they did send a delegation down to meet with us to try to negotiate about letting them park their bus there, and we told them no, not while we're here.

DC: Yeah. Is that because you needed sight lines out and didn't want it blocked off?

AD: Yeah. We needed—we didn't want our office blocked up, because we had painted "Black Panther Party" on there, and panthers on there, had all the posters on our windows and everything. So, we survived that summer of '68. And then, the fall, the first Panther is killed by the Seattle Police Department. Welton Armstead, 17 years old.

DC: What was the circumstance of that?

AD: He was at home. He was sort of like an underground, in that he wasn't a full-time Panther, but he brought money by and he brought guns by. He would steal guns to get money. He was a hustler, but he was still a Panther. He was lumpenproletariat.

So, anyway, I guess the police were out looking for him. He's at home at his mother's apartment, at him and his mother's apartment, and up on the third floor. He looks out the window and he sees the police. They are confronting his mother and bothering his mother. He grabs his rifle, he runs downstairs, and he gets involved. And they shoot him, but they shoot him in the back. They shoot him in the back. And that was our first casualty.

And there was another casualty in December, which came about because he was given an order by somebody to go rob a grocery store, and the grocery store owner killed him. So, that's when we started getting hip to something else is going on that we don't know about.

Then my trial starts in December. I have really a good lawyer, this lawyer who eventually became a federal Supreme Court judge here in the state of Washington. [Coughs] He was considered at the time to be one of the finest lawyers in the state of Washington. He comes and volunteers to take my case.

Because what had happened was when we were trying to get all our things we needed for our office—typewriters, desks, and all those things—there were informants that came into the party. So, this guy said, "Hey, man, so-and-so is going to give us a typewriter down at the Model City." He said, "We can come down there after five. All we've got to do is go in there and get it. They'll leave the door open for us."

So, I said, "Okay, let's go on down there." I'm excited, yeah, we're going to get a brand new typewriter. [Coughs] Excuse me. So, I carried it out. I carried it out of there and I carried it into the office. And a block away was a plainclothes detective watching me carry it into the office.

DC: The whole thing was a setup?

AD: The whole thing was a setup. So, when the trial comes, there's a secret witness that they adjoined the hearing to wait for the secret witness. Everybody is waiting for the secret witness. Who is going to be the secret witness? But he never shows up, so I'm found not guilty. [Coughs] I'm found not guilty.

So, anyway, I end up going—we end up having a purge. We get rid of a lot of people. And then, we start the Breakfast for Schoolchildren Program. Then, there were people who didn't think that was revolutionary, serving breakfast for schoolchildren. We open up our first breakfast program at Madrona Presbyterian Church. That was in the winter of '69.

DC: Can I ask about the philosophy there?

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're back.

DC: Yeah, the sort of maybe two competing camps—continuing armed revolution or meeting basic needs—in the black community.

AD: Yeah.

DC: Can you talk a little bit about how that conversation was happening in the party?

AD: Yeah. Are we ready?

DC: Yeah, we're back.

AD: Okay. And this was always—this was the dual nature of the Black Panther Party, is that there were elements in the party that believed in armed guerrilla warfare, and they wanted to go do that. And Eldridge Cleaver was the chief proponent of that. [1:25:00] He is the one that caused that incident where Little Bobby Hutton was killed.

There were people in the party who related to personalities. There were people who loved the personality of Huey. There were people who loved the personality of Bobby Seale. And there

were people who loved the personality of Eldridge. They were willing to—they thought that this was the way that we should be going.

So, but anyway, Eldridge has to go into exile. And I think, by 1970, he goes into exile, and he goes from Cuba, and then, eventually, he's living in Algeria, where the Black Panther Party is given diplomatic status, as well as a diplomatic compound. Even though he's not in the country, there are still, it's still a continuing struggle in the party of community programs.

So, we go on and start many more community programs. Then the Weatherman Underground takes off, [coughs] and the East Coast Panthers—

DC: And Bobby Seale is one of those who's a real proponent of the—

AD: The community programs, yeah, definitely. And then, so I go down to Oakland in '69. I go down there, and things aren't going well in Seattle, and Bobby Seale tells me to stay down there. And so, I stay down there. And I go back down with my family. And I'm getting training, because this is what they instituted after I had become captain. With the new chapters and branches, people had to come to Oakland and stay there for a while. But that didn't happen with me, because we were a new chapter. So, now I'm going through my kind of Panther training.

DC: So, you're living in Oakland?

AD: I'm living in Oakland.

DC: What's happening back up here in Seattle?

AD: Elmer is running things.

DC: Okay.

AD: And we had already started the purge. Before I went down there, we had already purged Curtis Harris and a whole bunch of other people. I told Elmer to just get rid of the rest.

DC: Did that ever come back on you, any of the purges? I imagine people weren't happy.

AD: Yeah. No, no, it didn't. It didn't come back, not necessarily. I mean, yeah, I mean, they were—my brother got threatened at Garfield High School. Some of them came up there with guns and threatened him. So, but, they knew not to really mess with us.

So, while I'm down in Oakland, Bobby Seale gets kidnapped by the FBI, and he's taken, driven to Chicago by car. Nobody knows where he's at, and he goes through the whole Chicago trial. They gag him. They chain him down to the chair. David Hilliard takes over the leadership of the party. Eldridge is in exile, Huey is in prison, Bobby is now in jail. The party is now under attack.

The FBI and J. Edgar Hoover, they said that, amongst themselves, they were going to have us eliminated by 1969. So, in January of 1969, Bunchy Carter and John Huggins, the two leaders of the Southern California chapter, are assassinated. Eleven months later, Fred Hampton of the Chicago chapter is assassinated. J. Edgar Hoover had sent out a memo that he wanted three chapters destroyed: Chicago, L.A., and Seattle. So, when Bobby is kidnapped and gone to jail, I'm sent back to Seattle.

DC: Okay.

AD: We've got to start this campaign to try to free Seattle. So, me and my brother, we start organizing. We're organizing the Seattle chapter. We get orders to close down the storefront and move into a community, move into a house in the community. So, we find a duplex and we open up a community center in the duplex. We start fortifying our office with sandbags.

We meet with this guy from the Justice Department, a black man that says he wants to meet with us. We don't want to meet with him. We put it off, we put it off, and finally he says that it's a matter of life and death. So, we meet with him. He tells us that they're going to come

in and kill us, that they're going to raid us and kill us. So, we start fortifying our office with sandbags and double sandbags and steel fortifications on the doors and on the windows.

DC: Is he threatening you, or is he sort of tipping you off?

AD: No, he's not threatening us. He's tipping us off.

DC: And why—what was motivating him, do you think?

AD: Because he's black. [Laughs]

DC: Okay. [Laughs]

AD: And he's from Seattle and he [laughs] [1:30:00] he tells us, "They're coming to kill you guys."

DC: Okay, so he really did tip you off?

AD: Yeah. He really did tip us off. And so, we start preparing. And we had already gotten orders anyway to fortify our offices, so all the Panther chapters all across the country are fortifying their offices with sandbags and bunkers and all kinds of things. My brother and I, we're still students at the UW, technically, and we get our last financial aid checks, $1700 each. We spend our whole checks, that whole—all that money went on guns, ammunition, gas masks, flak jackets, and things to fortify our office, things to protect us. And that was the most important thing, is that we're going to defend ourselves and protect ourselves.

But we had also started creating the breakfast program and expanding the breakfast program to five breakfast program locations in Seattle. And the Black Panther Party across the country is expanding these survival programs. And we started the first free medical clinic in Seattle. The party opened up 11 medical clinics all across the country, and in some places, they started a free ambulance program. We start the first food bank program, which is now a nationwide program, and in the state of Washington, it's a statewide program. The Black Panther

Party started the first food bank program, which is a staple now, the way that people survive, and our clinics and free legal aid program—we start a free legal aid program. We start the "buses to prisons" program. Somebody gives up a 35 passenger bus to use to go to all the prisons. Then we're, you know—

DC: How are you able to fund all these programs?

AD: We get orders that every Panther has to sell 100 papers a day. So, we're selling, so we got a lot of—some of the funds came from the newspapers. But we had somebody who was a breakfast program coordinator, the medical clinic coordinator, the liberation school coordinator, and they had to go out and hustle. They had to go out and get money for their program to get resources for the program. Then, there's wealthy people, liberal, who are donating money. And we got a lot of money that was donated from Japanese, older Japanese. And I didn't know why at the time, but I learned about the internment program, and that's why that they're contributing to us.

DC: Um-hmm. Now, in your—what's going on in your personal life right now? Are you still single, or—?

AD: Oh, I had become married. In '68, I got married. My son was born in '69, so I've got a little family going on.

DC: So, did that change things for you at all?

AD: No, because my wife is in the party, as well.

DC: Okay.

AD: So, we're all just moving forward. And like you said early on, you're going through these highs and lows. Well, we're *really* going through these highs and lows now. You know, we're really going. It's just like everything is moving. So, we've got to sell papers every day.

Everybody has to go out in the field and sell papers every day. Then, we have the breakfast program. We've got to get up early in the morning and go to the breakfast program. We're running all these programs, and there's no government funding that's coming in.

But it's really a great time, because we're so energized. We're young and we've got a lot of energy and we're able to do all these things. And we're fearless. We're not afraid of anything. It's just like 20 of us, 25 of us, compared to 200 of us, and we're doing so much work. And not only do we have to do all this work, but when we come in from the field, we all eat together communally, then we have political education class, we have weapons class, and everybody has to pull security two hours a night, 10:00 to 12:00, 12:00 to 2:00, 2:00 to 4:00, 4:00 to 6:00. So, you know, it's just a constant thing.

DC: It's an intense lifestyle.

AD: It's a very intense lifestyle but we're—this is what we wanted, want to do.

And so, they began this attack, this attack this guy is talking about. They start in Chicago. They go in there and they kill Fred Hampton. They wanted to kill Bobby Rush, but he wasn't there. And then, four or five days later, they go to L.A. and they raid the L.A. office. But the L.A. Panthers are very military-minded, and they've got a bunker built inside, and they have a shootout.

DC: They're ready.

AD: It lasted six or eight hours, you know.

DC: Yeah.

AD: And the only thing to stop them was they run out of ammunition. And they surrender. Then, the ATF comes to Seattle. They go to Mayor Wes Uhlman, and Mayor Wes Uhlman says, "I'm not going to let you do that," because he saw what happened in Chicago, he

saw what happened to L.A. Seattle is a much smaller place. [1:35:00] Everybody knows us. Everybody knows who we are. We've got—the problem is these programs. We've got all these programs we're doing. We're testing for sickle cell anemia.

DC: Right, right.

AD: And we did the first mass testing of sickle cell anemia in Walla Walla Prison. So, I mean, people are depending upon us. So, how is he going to let the ATF come in there and try to kill us? So, he says, "No."

DC: Had you had any dealings with Wes Uhlman before this?

AD: No, not really. Not really.

DC: Okay.

AD: But we had continuous attempts to raid our office by the Seattle Police Department.

DC: Okay.

AD: And there were two policemen that they assigned just to harass us, arrest us. It's been a constant battle just with the Seattle Police Department, fighting them and dealing with them and dealing with the issues that they're causing in the community as well.

DC: Are there black officers in the police department at this point?

AD: There's only one.

DC: Just one?

AD: Only one, yeah. And he does intervene in the behalf of a Panther, Leon Valentine Hobbs. When Mayor Wes Uhlman sticks up, then other municipalities start sticking up, too, and not allowing these raids to take place. And when Mayor Wes Uhlman goes back to D.C. for the mayors' convention, he's told he's not welcome, and they don't let him in.

DC: Oh, really?

AD: Yeah. Because Nixon—you know, this is part of Nixon's plan. He wanted—this is what he wanted. I was on Nixon's enemy list. He had an enemy list of 100. I'm sure most of those people were Panthers that were on that enemy list.

The Seattle Police Department also had put out a contract on my head, a $25,000 contract. This was during the summer of '68 to stop the firebombing, because *Time* magazine had a chart of cities during the summer of '68. They had two charts, a chart of firebombing and a chart of sniping. And Seattle was number one on firebombing, compared to Chicago, Detroit, and all the other places, we were number one, and we were number two in sniping. So, they felt that if they got rid of me, that they could end the firebombing, end the firebombing campaign. And the firebombing campaign was really directed at racist establishments in and outside of the community. And it got out of hand, because there were some people who weren't necessarily racist establishments that did get firebombed, but that was casualties of war.

DC: Um-hmm. So, were targets chosen collectively or—?

AD: Yeah. Yeah, we chose targets collectively, but there were people who went off and did their own thing and that was unfortunate. [Coughs] So, this guy, Curtis Harris—this is during the summer of '68. I failed to mention this. But we got our hands on some dynamite and we left two people to watch the dynamite and we went somewhere. And we came back, and the dynamite was gone. We said, "What happened to the dynamite?" "Oh, the police came in here and took it." So, we thought that was strange. They were police informants.

So, about a couple of days later, these two police informants *and* Curtis Harris—I'm closing the office up one night, and they said, "We're gonna—Aaron, we're gonna walk you home." And this is the summer of '68 when things were really hot. And I thought that was

unusual, because they had never volunteered to walk me home before. So, we're walking. A police car—

DC: Did you usually have security or bodyguards?

AD: No, I didn't.

DC: You didn't.

AD: I didn't. But there was one brother named LewJack who said he was going to be my bodyguard. He was with me quite a bit. There was a story that he used to sleep in his car in front of my house. But LewJack had become part of this other thing that was going on.

So, anyway, these guys are going to walk me home. We get halfway there. A police car drives by. One of them pulls his gun out and shoots at, fires at the police. And then, I look around. They're gone. They disappear, and I knew that I'd better disappear. So, I'm trying to find somewhere to hide, frantically, and I run in somebody's backyard. And I run into the backyard and I say, "Damn! There's no escape from this backyard," because it's got these high bushes and fences all the way around.

So, I hear the police cars driving up. I hear the police talking to themselves. Then I hear them running up the stairs toward where I'm at. [1:40:00] And I pull my gun out and I'm thinking, "Oh, shit! I'm dead." A man comes out on the porch. I knew the man. I knew his kids. I grew up with his kids. He told his kids not to hang around with me and my brother when we joined the party, which I can understand. So, he calls me in. I run into his house, and just as the door closed, the police come into the yard, and we're watching them searching. And they go back out. They're looking under cars and they're looking under bushes, and everything. So, we wait, and they leave. And then, after they left, I went home.

So, [clears throat] anyway, getting back to what happened with Mayor Wes Uhlman. So, it starts an investigation into not only the activities of the Black Panther Party, but also the response by the FBI. Because of this investigation, they have to stop those covert raids that they were doing on the Black Panther Party from ’68 all the way to ’69, where a lot of Panthers were arrested, many charged with long, long, many years in prison. Finally, that kind of stopped somewhat.

So then we’re moving forward our programs. And then, in—I think it was about ’71—in the fall of ’71, me and another comrade, we decide to take our weapons out, all the weapons. We get them all together and put them in his step van. We’re going to take them out and test them. So, we take them all out and we’re testing them. We test all the weapons except for the last one, which was a shotgun, a Riot 18 shotgun that I purchased in Oakland. It had a bayonet attachment on it, and I had my own bandolier of shells that I used. My bandolier oftentimes was in the office, and everybody knew that was my bandolier.

So, Big Malcolm says, “Aaron, this is your weapon. You go ahead and fire it.” And we had been smoking some hash on the way there. I put the shotgun up to my shoulder. Something tells me don’t fire it from my shoulder. I bring it down here. I fire from here. As soon as the firing pin hits the primer, the gun explodes and blows my arm halfway off. That’s why I’ve got all this, and I’ve got a steel rod and two plates on my arm. I go through about four surgeries. But we had the bullets tested and find out that the gunpowder had been taken out and high explosives had been put in its place. So, it was definitely another assassination attempt. But I was back at the office within three days with my arm in a cast. We just had too much work to do.

DC: And if that gun had been up at shoulder height—

AD: Yeah, it would have blew my head. It would have blew my head off. I wouldn't be here. So, and shortly after that, there's a split between the Black Panther Party. That's when the split happens, because Huey gets released from prison, and there's a lot of high hopes. And then, him and Eldridge get on a talk show. Letters had been sent to Eldridge in Algeria, saying that Huey wants to kill you. There had been letters sent to Huey, saying Eldridge wants to kill you. [Coughs] So, they were—FBI was fostering already the strained relationships and the distance that they had between each other.

And the New York Panthers decide that they want to take orders from the Weather Underground, because they feel that the Underground Movement is where it's at. Huey expels them from the Black Panther Party, and that leads to the split into the party.

DC: Now, how are you hearing about these things? Where is your information coming from?

AD: Oh, I'm getting calls from the national headquarters. I'm called down there. I get called down there, [coughs] and other Panther officials from all across the country are called down to Oakland. And we're told about the situation, and they want to see whose side everybody is on.

DC: Right.

AD: [Coughs] Most of New Jersey and New York go with Eldridge. And just about everybody else, except for the San Francisco—some of the San Francisco Panthers who were real close to Eldridge, [1:45:00] they go with Eldridge. And the Berkeley Panthers, they go with Eldridge as well. We're fighting each other on the streets, and people get killed. And Huey decides not to have this thing get escalated anymore. He could have sent—he could have given the order, and we could have had an all-out war.

DC: Right.

AD: But Huey says, "No, we're not going to go that way." So, we decide that Oakland is going to be a base of operations, that we need to have a base and we need to strengthen that base. As a centralization campaign is started, Panthers are brought from all over the country to Oakland, to be stationed in Oakland. Elmer had gone to jail, to prison in Oregon for armed robbery of a leather coat. So, when the centralization takes place, he's locked up.

So, we leave a skeleton crew of people in Seattle and—before that, before we went down to Oakland, we had led a campaign to get Elmer freed. We actually got the governor to pardon him. That's the first time and only time that that happened, that a governor was going to pardon a Black Panther Party member. [Coughs] But myself and my father and my attorney, we met with the governor and we got him to do this. We had a petition drive as well. So, we all come down to Oakland, and there's people there from all over the country.

DC: You come down with your family?

AD: I come down with my wife and my son, and it must have been about ten to fifteen of us. And we—oh, man! We were so well-established in Seattle. But Elmer was able to come out and recruit new people, and they were able to keep the clinic going and expand the clinic and expand the programs and really keep things going. And in Oakland, we decided we were going to enter the electoral process.

DC: Right.

AD: The first thing we did is support Shirley Chisholm's campaign for president. And we begin organizing our own campaign to run Bobby Seale for mayor of Oakland and Elaine Brown for city council. Opened up five campaign offices. It's a masterful campaign. We give away 10,000 bags of groceries with a chicken in every bag to kick off the campaign at the Oakland

Auditorium. I remember seeing the bags, 10,000 empty bags on the floor of the Oakland Auditorium. And how we were able to make this thing happen, put the chickens in and the eggs in and the potatoes in and the canned food, the loaf of bread, and give it out so that the chicken is still frozen the very next day. It was just a beautiful campaign.

I was confined to the office as officer of the day. I thought I was going to get a high-level position in the campaign, but I didn't. Huey really was trying to get rid of me. He had gotten rid of other people, and he was trying to get rid of me. People had asked if I'd be included in the security squad that Huey had set up. He had chosen people from different places to be in this security squad. And there were people that felt that I should be in, but Huey would always say, "No."

DC: What do you think was going on there?

AD: He thought I had too much power. I was a threat—he thought I was a threat to him, because he felt that—well, he told somebody that a lot of people had a lot of respect for me in the party. He was doing that with some really good people. He ran off a lot of really good people.

Eventually, we ran Bobby's campaign. It was a masterful campaign. We didn't win, but we came really close. Other politicians started coming to us, because they saw we had a political machine. We could get out the vote. Because we really did—we put 350 people out on the street every day to get people, to register people to vote. And the campaign, we put 400 or 500 people out on the street. We took people out of their homes to the polling places. So, we did truly have a political campaign.

DC: Now, were black folks registered or voting in these days?

AD: No, they weren't. [1:50:00] We met so many people that never voted before. In Oakland, old people—never voted, never even registered to vote. So, that was a very important piece to get these people registered and get them involved in the campaign.

DC: Did you do specific things on voting day to make sure that people got to the polls?

AD: Yeah. We went—we had people standing on corners and freeway overpasses. We had vans going to people's homes and taking people from their homes to the polling places. We were very much active that whole day, you know, that whole day.

DC: Now, in terms of—you know, I don't know how much you're—

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay, we're back.

DC: Yeah, I'm just curious about how much—I don't know how much you're thinking these things through, but, you know, from armed revolution to actually using, you know, the political system. So, now, this is a different kind of tactic.

AD: Yeah. But see that was the beauty about the Black Panther Party, is that we were never wedded to one tactic. Because we read a lot, we understood that nothing stood outside of change, that we always had to be adaptable and we always had to be changing. That's why we went from the armed revolution to the breakfast program to survival programs and doing all these programs, and then, to electoral politics. We were constantly evolving and constantly changing our tactics to achieve what we were trying to achieve.

There were always people on the left who would always criticize us for, first of all, having the broad coalitions that we had with all the different people and with the Brown Berets, the Red Guard, the AIM, the white—the Young Patriots and SDS, the Peace and Freedom Party. And then, now the survival—most revolutionary organizations at that time, they didn't think

about doing those survival programs, feeding kids. They didn't think that was revolutionary, but it was very revolutionary.

DC: Absolutely.

AD: Then we went from there and we went to the electoral politics. And it just made perfect sense that we would try to take over the whole electoral piece of Oakland. That was our goal, to make Oakland a base of our operations and expand from there.

DC: Right, but changing the system, so from without or from within?

AD: Yeah. Right, yeah, and we could do it with both. But we still had our underground. We still had a—this was actually before the split. After the split, the underground caved in, because there were people who were in the underground who sided with Eldridge, and they no longer had the support from the party. One of those people was Geronimo. He was kind of caught in the middle. And he had a case, and Panthers weren't allowed to testify in his case, so he goes to prison.

So anyway, then Huey becomes—starts snorting cocaine, and his whole piece about what he's supposed to be doing and what the party is supposed to be doing really gets distorted. And he really begins to become more of a gangster than a revolutionary.

DC: And you see that? You see his personality really affected?

AD: Yeah, yeah. Cocaine had really changed him. Plus the fact that, when he went to prison, the Black Panther Party was just a small organization based in Oakland and in L.A. Just friends, people he knew. Now, he comes out, and it's an international organization. He's an international hero. He's almost on the level with Che Guevara. He's got access to all this power and money. But he also—there's all these people he doesn't know and he doesn't trust them.

And we're already—we're paranoid anyway! We're already paranoid. We're paranoid about the phone, we're paranoid about so-and-so working next to us, and who's an informant and who's not an informant. Then he comes out and he's paranoid. And then, he starts snorting cocaine and becomes even more paranoid. And I think at some point he really didn't realize—he didn't want to—this is not really what he wanted to do. This is not the role that he envisioned himself doing. He was thrusted up into this role. And so, he starts dismantling the party.

So, anyway, a contract is put out on his head. A warrant is also put out on his head. He runs off Bobby Seale, [1:55:00] John Seale, many other people. And he has to go and flee and go to Cuba and go into exile. And Elaine Brown becomes the chairperson of the Black Panther Party. She starts rebuilding the party and she chooses me as her bodyguard.

DC: Can I ask just as sort of a sidebar about—if you could talk about the role of women in the party and how women were treated, or what the philosophy of the party was in terms of including women?

AD: Well, women were considered to be equal in the party. They did everything that the men did and they weren't confined to doing women's chores. First of all, the type of women that joined the party, they weren't going to go for that anyway. They were some very tough, very demanding women. You couldn't pull no crap over on them. They were equal and they served in leadership. The Connecticut chapter was run by a woman, Ericka. The Boston chapter captain was a woman, Audrea Jones. You had Panthers who were—women who were on—Elaine Brown and Kathleen Cleaver were on the Central Committee of the Black Panther Party. Women had a very prominent, very strong role [coughs] in the party.

Now, that doesn't say that there weren't problems that existed, because trying to overcome the whole issue of male dominance and machoism and stuff was very difficult. And

there were places, in some places, and even in the Southern California chapter, where women were abused in many ways. That's what Elaine Brown had come out of [coughs] and now, here she was, was the head of the whole Black Panther Party, or what was left of it. So, she begins to rebuild the party.

DC: And you're on her staff. What's your position there?

AD: I'm her bodyguard.

DC: Bodyguard.

AD: Yeah. And she goes to Cuba to visit Huey, and Huey tells her to ask Lionel Wilson, a retired Superior Court judge, if he wanted to be mayor. We ask him, and he says, "Yeah." And so, we start running a campaign to run him for mayor. Now, meanwhile—

JB: Can I ask a question about that?

AD: Sure.

JB: Did you know Roberta Alexander?

AD: Yes!

JB: She's an old friend.

AD: Oh, wow! Wow! Roberta Alexander, man! This tall woman, right?

JB: Yes, tall woman.

AD: Yeah, kind of light-complected, yeah. And she worked a lot with Big Man. And Big Man was editor of the newspaper, and they traveled. They did a lot of traveling around the world, talking about—they went to Japan. They spent a lot of time in Japan and South Korea and many other places. And she worked on the newspaper, too. She was very, a very important person in the party.

JB: I ran into her—

AD: She's still alive?

JB: She's still alive. She's driving.

AD: Where's she at?

JB: She's in California.

AD: Okay.

JB: She and my wife were friends.

DC: Oh yeah, you told me that.

AD: Yeah, so—

JB: Anyway—

AD: I'm glad you did! I'm so glad to hear that she's alive and doing well. Man! So, anyway—

DC: Because that's not a given, I guess, in your world.

AD: No.

DC: That people are—survive.

AD: Actually—no, it's not. It's not a given, especially some women, because they had—they did have a hard time with some things. But so did a lot of men. It just wasn't easy after it was all over.

But getting back to the story, before we ran Lionel Wilson's campaign, Jerry Brown came to us and asked us to support his bid for governor for the state of California. And he had some close relationships with party members in L.A., and Elaine Brown knew him, so we said, "Yeah. Yeah, we'll support you. We'll work in your campaign." So, lo and behold, he becomes the governor.

Elaine is spending a lot of time in the governor's office, meeting with him and Tony Klein, who is the head legal person in the state of California and had also worked with the party in Southern California. [2:00:00] And Elaine is cultivating this relationship. Jerry Brown calls Elaine up and says, "I have six judgeships that I want to fill in Oakland. Can you help me?" She says, "Yes, I'll get back with you with the names." She gives him the names of six black attorneys, and they all become judges.

DC: Wow.

AD: And so, you could say that we had some control of the judiciary in Oakland because of this. And those lawyers knew why they became judges, is because of the Black Panther Party. Elaine made sure they knew that. So, you know, damn! We're getting some power here.

So, then we started running Lionel Wilson's campaign and, lo and behold, we put the first black mayor into office in Oakland! And, in return, he's going to appoint two Panther women to the Port of Oakland. And the Central Committee is made up of mostly women at this time, because Elaine brought women up and got them on the Central Committee. Now, we're in Lionel Wilson's office. We're running the city! The Black Panther Party is running the city! We're meeting with the—damn, what is that person's name? I can't think of his name.

But, man, it was really—plus, we had a private school and a community center. And the private school was one of the best private schools in the country. It started off as a private school just for Panther kids, but it expanded through the community. We had people who were doctors and lawyers that had their kids there, as well as kids who came from the housing projects that were there. We had a martial arts program that was on the cover of *Black Belt* magazine that had over a hundred students. We started the first gang intervention program in the Bay Area.

And we got a CETA grant. You know, CETA was the comprehensive employment program. That was one of the best programs the government ever had. They gave money to nonprofits and businesses to hire people. We were able to put 20 Panthers on the payroll with the big CETA grant that we got, and that's how we started our gang intervention program. And we started a Seniors Against a Fearful Environment program, where we got gang members—we hired gang-involved youth to work with seniors on the weekend when they got their paycheck and escort them to the bank, escort them to the grocery store, and so on.

And Elaine was able to clean the image up of the Black Panther Party. We also had a restaurant and a bar and grill in downtown Oakland called the Lamp Post. We also had some other businesses. We had a promotion business where we brought Marvin Gaye and Chaka Khan and Earth, Wind, and Fire and other people to Oakland, and Ike and Tina Turner, which didn't turn out to be so good. And then, we had these millionaires who all they did was give money to the party. We bought a lot of property. We owned a lot of property. Where we had the school was a huge property.

DC: What about your relationship with other groups? I'm just thinking of the Nation and I know they have presence in Oakland and own property and have businesses.

AD: You mean the Nation of Islam?

DC: Yeah.

AD: We had a contentious relationship with them, because Huey was—before he went into exile, he was involved in drug operations. And he had actually told Farrakhan—they had a meeting with Farrakhan, "You stay over in San Francisco, and we'll deal with Oakland." And, now, Huey didn't like heroin. He would not allow heroin. He didn't like heroin to be on the street. [Coughs] But, because cocaine was a casual drug, it was something that he had gotten—

the party had gotten involved in, [coughs] in working with different drug dealers and after-hour clubs and stuff, and also making the after-hour clubs and the pimps pay the party. They had to pay money. That's why Huey had to go into exile. That's why they put this contract out on him, because he had instituted a policy where they had to pay money to the party in order to operate.

DC: The drug dealers and the pimps?

AD: Yeah. And we had—actually had a movie theater that we got from the Mafia. The Mafia owned this Oakland theater, and we were [2:05:00] putting on—we were running it and we were showing movies there. [Coughs] So, there was a lot of stuff going on.

DC: Yeah.

JB: We're going to pause.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay.

AD: So, Oakland—Elaine is becoming, like, really well-known. And she's the most powerful person in the state of California. Leo McCarthy, the Speaker of the House for the State Assembly, Willie Brown, you know, I met all these guys. And we were down in Sacramento all the time and going to these events with these big high guys, and they're just fawning all over Elaine. One thing, they're afraid of her; the other thing, they have great respect for her.

Elaine is also cultivating relationships with the big corporations, the Shetterly, William [Robert] Shetterly, head of the Clorox Corporation, or, one of those—a couple of those corporations. I mean, she could go to these people and say, "I need $400,000 for the school," and they'd give it to her. So, we've got a lot of power.

DC: Yeah. Now, is the Panther image changing at all, exterior-wise? I mean, are you still wearing the uniforms?

AD: No, we're wearing suits, man!

DC: You're wearing suits.

AD: We're wearing suits. Since 1969, we stopped wearing the—we got orders to stop the Panther uniform, because it separated us from the community and made us targets.

DC: Okay.

AD: So, we had already started dressing differently in '69. But now, those of us—we're running the school. We've got a private school. We're running all this big nonprofit entity. We've got about four or five different nonprofits. And we've got these businesses we're running. Elaine is very much in the whole image mode so people who are around her—you had to be well-dressed.

Elaine becomes president of the Oakland Redevelopment Corporation that wants to redevelop downtown Oakland, because Oakland has kind of been suppressed. So, she's now over all these millions of dollars to develop Oakland. And, as part of this, she makes them put it in there that they have to build 1,000 low-income housing units for this redevelopment. But in order to make this happen, they need the freeway to come through Oakland. And so, she's able to get Jerry Brown to release the funds to build the freeway ramps to come into Oakland. That's okayed, and so that starts to happen.

So, Elaine has become a very powerful person in Oakland, I mean, in the state of California. She could get almost anything she wants from these politicians, because they're afraid of her, for one. And she's extremely intelligent and extremely bright.

So, she paves the way for Huey to come back and stand trial. And that was the fatal mistake. Because our goal was—we had taken over Oakland, okay, so we were going to do the same thing in other parts of the country. We were going to do it in Seattle. We were going to do

it in Chicago. We were going to do it in other places where there was still Black Panther Party network. So she paves the way for Huey to come back to stand trial, and he comes back. First of all, he sees all the power she has and he wants control of that money she has, as well, and she's not giving that up. She's not going to do that. And some other things happen, and he starts back snorting cocaine again.

There was a drug gang that had been terrorizing one of the housing—actually had taken over a housing project near the school. We had started a campaign to get rid of this drug gang. And these guys had machine guns, they had the whole shebang, and I think they were getting the heroin from the Mafia. But they were very well-organized. They even were using a computer back then. And so, we're planning against them. We hit a couple of their safe houses and we're organizing the community against them. And—

DC: This is really at the beginning of gangs, isn't it?

AD: Yeah, this was the beginning. And Felix Mitchell, the guy's name was Felix Mitchell. And this was going to be bloody and this was going to be—a lot of people were going to be killed in this. Because they're driving by the school and they're looking at us, they're looking at me and Elaine's car. [2:10:00] They're stopping and writing things down. We're doing the same to them.

Then Huey comes back. Huey comes back; he wants control of this money. Elaine won't give it to him. He does some other things. He forces Elaine out of the party. Elaine leaves the party. And she takes out a full-page ad in the *Oakland Tribune*, you know, and she says that she's going to pursue her music career. Because she's been under contract with Motown, because she made several albums while she was in the party. When she leaves, a lot of these very smart women start leaving.

DC: Now, is there a relationship to this drug—that story you were starting to tell about the drug gang and the—with Huey?

AD: Yeah. Yeah, because when Huey comes back and when Elaine leaves, he meets with these two drug gangs and tells them that, in order to operate, that they've got to pay the party, you know, 25,000-50,000 a week or month or something like that. And so, they go. They say they're going to think about it. We start preparing to go to war with these guys.

And also, Huey—at this point, everything he does is wrong. Everything he does just leads to a quicker decline of the party. He decides that this woman who is to testify against him in the trial—Elaine already had that under control. She already had gotten somebody to become good friends with this woman and follow her around and become close with her and to try to find out what she was going to say during the testimony.

But Huey decides he wants to have her eliminated. And he sends some people to have her—now, I was supposed to be one of those people, but he has me replaced at the last minute. The person he replaces me with, when they get to the scene, they accidentally shoot another Panther in the back of the head. And everything just falls apart from there. They've got to leave this guy's body there. The next day, the *Oakland Tribune,* "Panther in Blue Jumpsuit Found with M16," and they find another M16, and it just spirals downhill from there. And that really was pretty much the end of the Black Panther Party.

The last thing I did, I got orders to—Huey is trying to cover his tracks. People are going underground, because the congressional investigation has been convened to investigate the Black Panther Party and all these things that had been happening. And I get this note, order, to get rid of all the weaponry, illegal weaponry, of the party. I spend two days crawling in crawlspaces, digging up weapons, going in attics, and collecting all these weapons: machine guns, .50-caliber

machine guns, antiaircraft weapons, M16s, AK-47s, all these weapons that we accumulated over the years. And I have to dump it off the Marin County, the Marin Bridge at three in the morning. [Laughs] I had to make two trips. I got the longest U-Haul truck you could get.

DC: And how many weapons do you think there were?

AD: Oh, God, it took me two days! It took me two days. And even then, when I thought I was finished, I get back to my house and I'm laying across the bed. And I look in the closet, and there's about four M16s in the closet. So, I've got to take those down. I go throw them in the Oakland Estuary.

And then, I get in a confrontation with Bill Cosby on passing out some flyers for Huey's upcoming trial. And I get in a confrontation with Bill Cosby, and he talks about Huey. And I have no defense for Huey, because everything he says is true. And about a week later, after that, I leave the Black Panther Party. Then, I meet someone who was in the party, who leaves as well, and he says, "It's a good thing you left, because Huey was going to have you killed." So, I had left just in time, which—I always seem to be one step ahead of whatever danger was coming.

DC: Um-hmm. When you say "leave," what did that mean, to leave the party, or what did that entail?

AD: Well, for most people, when people left the party, they left, and they didn't tell nobody. They left at night. They left at night and they didn't take anything with them [2:15:00] but maybe their bare essentials. They just left in the middle of the night.

But I didn't feel that I—I wasn't going to leave that way. It had been ten years. I had given everything I had. I wasn't going to leave like that. I told Big Bob, Huey's bodyguard, that I wanted to take a leave of absence for a year. He called Huey and got Huey to okay it, and then I left.

DC: Now, did you—did you ever expect to live that long?

AD: Oh, no. None of us ever—none of us—never expected to live very long at all, because there were over 30 party members that were killed from '67 to about 1972. So, no. I never expected to live. None of us expected to live to be—you know, too long.

DC: Um-hmm.

AD: So.

DC: And then, after you left, did you come back up to Seattle?

AD: No, I didn't, because I couldn't leave Oakland. I had too many memories there. I was tied there. I was tied there, even though I had gotten a threat from Huey when I helped somebody else to leave, when I took another Panther to the airport to go to L.A. to leave. And Huey found out about it and had Big Bob call me and tell me I had 24 hours to leave town. Even then, I still didn't leave. I just hid out in San Francisco and just was careful of where I went and what I did.

DC: And then, that situation just cooled down, or what?

AD: Yeah, because the party was going down. People were leaving, and pretty soon there was—people were leaving.

I could have come back. My father was going to get me a job at Boeing. My parents wanted me to come back and go to school at the UW. But I had been on the other side for so long that I—I just couldn't do it. I couldn't see myself going from what I had been doing to, now, going to college. I had been on the other side of the law for so long. And I had that adrenalin rush. I had become addicted to it.

And I tried to get a job. I got some jobs, and it didn't work out. And I met some people and I got involved in the criminal life. For a year, I was involved in—I sold some cocaine. And I

got involved in embezzlement and made $100,000 in a year and went on the run from the FBI for about a year and, eventually was caught. And came back to Oakland and got out and started putting my life together and working.

DC: Did you serve time over that?

AD: I did. I served about a year, about a year. I became a substance abuse counselor and, eventually, I did move back to Seattle.

DC: I guess we'll start to wrap up, but tell me about the kinds of work that you then went into back in Seattle.

JB: It's a hell of a story.

DC: It *is* a hell of a story. I'll amen to that. The kinds of work that you ended up doing back here.

AD: Well, first I started off as a substance abuse counselor in Oakland, and I did that for a while. And I was—I did really good at it, even though I had never abused substances before. And that was when I first started. I started working at a—first, a detox—and we started to open up a big live-in recovery program. And these guys said, "Man, you ain't ever been no drug addict. How you going teach us anything?" But I just had that natural way of empathizing with people and I became the best counselor on the staff. And I even brought in some of the things that we had done in the Black Panther Party, where I helped them to open up a clothing program in the thing and doing some other things.

And I had an evaluation that I had to do, and I had to go down and meet with the executive director. And the executive director was this—he had a degree. He was a doctor. He was over the West Oakland Health Clinic and he was also a doctor at several hospitals. And he

hired everybody that came in and he fired everybody, so he was like this control—he was a control dude. And he had a big giant house in Sonoma County and all this stuff.

So, I go in to see him for my evaluation. And there was one little thing wrong with my [2:20:00] evaluation. And he says to me—he's sitting in his big leather chair and he says to me, "Dixon, I hear you've been fucking up." I said—oh!—I just—I said, "Man, fuck you! Kiss my mother-fucking ass!" And walked out because I had been through that shit with somebody else, with Huey, and I wasn't going to go through that with nobody else. So, I walked off the job.

I was able to get unemployment. They fought tooth and nail to keep me from getting unemployment. I was told, "Man, nobody ever gets unemployment from these people," but I was able to get it. I went up to Northern California, worked on a marijuana farm for a couple of months, had people selling marijuana for me. [Laughs] Eventually, I came back to Seattle, because what happened was the crack cocaine epidemic hit.

DC: Right.

AD: That's what my next book is going to be about. It's going to be what happened in the '80s and how all that cocaine came in and how it affected the black community. I saw what it did to Oakland. It just—oh, it was just like a wave, a black cloud, just—Oakland was such a vibrant place in the '70s for black people. We called it "Chocolate City." We had a black mayor, we had black nightclubs, and—oh, man, it was just a great place to be!

Then, all of a sudden, this thing hit. And I saw it hit. And I had friends and party members who were addicted to cocaine. And everybody else was selling it—teachers and *everybody*, man! It was just a mess. So, I came back to Seattle. A month after I had been in Seattle, here comes the epidemic in Seattle.

DC: In Seattle, yeah.

AD: *Zoom!* And I brought my girlfriend to Seattle with me. She was addicted to cocaine. I didn't know it. I—we had two kids, and I was trying to keep her from being addicted, and you can never do that. I struggled with that and became a gang counselor. I worked with youths and—that's a whole other story, which I'm going to talk about in my second book.

DC: Yeah. And what are you doing now?

AD: Well, I started a nonprofit organization about ten years ago, and we opened up a transition housing program for 18 to 24 year-olds. And we started a youth leadership project in the high schools. We are in five different schools. We started the first media literacy program in a high school here in Seattle. We took a group of kids to the World Social Forum in Brazil on several occasions. And I got burnt out on that. I finally got my book finished.

And I got behind on paying my federal income taxes for the nonprofit. I wasn't a good administrator. And towards the end, I was really tired of doing that. I really wanted to write. In August, I became separated from Central House. The transition house is still going on, but I got separated from that, which was—I was able to get unemployment and I filed for my Social Security. And in September, I had a big book opening for my book. My book came out September 17th.

JB: [inaudible]

AD: And I went on a book tour. So, one thing replaced the other.

DC: Yeah.

AD: So, in July, I'm going to start working on my second book.

DC: So, you've been going around with the book?

AD: Yeah, this book. Talking to a lot of people. It's a lot of young people that have a lot of questions. They are really hungry. "How did you do it? And how were you able to sacrifice

yourself so selflessly? And how do we stop police brutality? How do we do this? How do we do that?"

DC: I was going to say, because some of the—I was going to ask you about the legacy of your work, because—I know the health clinic survives and things like that. But, then, the same issues are here—

AD: Yeah.

DC: Too, especially with youth.

AD: Yeah, yeah. And worse—things are much, much worse, because we don't have the unity that we had. We don't have the unity among black people. We don't have the unity that we had as people, working-class people and poor people, that we had back then.

DC: The way you were describing your neighborhood?

AD: Yeah, yeah. Individualism starts getting pushed in the 1970s, and narcissism is very much a part of our culture now. And this whole individualism and materialism that really—Ronald Reagan really kicked off with the neo-economic policies [2:25:00] and the deregulations that just really has taken this country down the drain, not to mention the fact that he was responsible, along with George Bush, for flying in all those shipments of cocaine that devastated the black community—not only devastated the black community, but has affected the whole economy of America, because all the resources that have had to go to dealing with that crisis. And now we have 2,500,000 people in prison; most of them, 60% of them, are Latino and black male.

DC: Yeah.

AD: You know that the crack cocaine addiction really has devastated the black community. It just destroyed our families, destroyed our community. We don't have community

anymore. We don't have the type of family structure that we had anymore. We have kids raising themselves. The cultural value system that we had when we were growing up does not exist anymore, because we had a cultural value system that existed prior to 1970s and '80s.

DC: You're talking about growing up with two-parent families and—?

AD: Yeah.

DC: Yeah.

AD: And people stayed together. Even though they didn't get along, they stayed together for the family. That was the most important thing, whether they got along together or not. And you don't see that kind of sacrifice and commitment anymore.

DC: Well, let me just ask you if there's anything else that—or anything I didn't ask about, or anything else that you thought I should have asked or that you would like to say to wrap up.

AD: No, I—that's about it. That's about it. I've been—I came back to Seattle two weeks ago, because I had five events up there, up here, that I had to go to. So, I've been talking—oh, man, I've been really busy. Every day this past week, I've had a speaking event that I've had to go to. And I brought Elaine Brown up here on Thursday.

DC: Oh, you did?

AD: Along with Cha-Cha Jiménez from the Young Lords. And we had a nice big event at the University of Washington, which was really—it was well-attended, a packed audience, and it really turned out to be really a great event.

DC: You're still in touch with Elaine and other people?

AD: Oh, yeah, yeah. Elaine and I are good friends, yeah. And she came to my book event in Oakland, along with Ericka Huggins.

DC: Well—

JB: Thank you.

DC: Thank you so much.

AD: Okay. Thank you.

JB: That was amazing.

[Recording ends at 2:27:31]

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Sally C. Council